

# Jerusalem Perspective

A Monthly Report on Research into the Words of Jesus

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## FRESH INSIGHT INTO JESUS' WORDS

A revolution in Gospel scholarship has been quietly taking place in Jerusalem. For the first time in history, Jewish and Christian scholars in Israel are working together to examine Jesus' sayings from a Hebraic perspective. The results are providing fresh insight into the words of Jesus.

The work of the Jerusalem School for the Study of the Synoptic Gospels is revealing Jesus to have been not only Jewish, but a rabbi who spoke Hebrew and used Hebraic teaching methods.

As a consequence of this research, many Christians are gaining an enhanced appreciation of the Gospels, and a renewed respect for Christianity's Jewish roots.

In the forthcoming issues of JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE, we will pass on to you the insights these scholars have gained through their years of research. These insights will enrich your understanding of the Bible and illuminate many of Jesus' difficult sayings.

We hope you will be as excited as we are to learn more about Jesus.

## RABBINIC PARALLELS

*One of the important aspects of Jesus' ministry is that he lived a full human life on earth. As such, he existed in an historical context—he was a Jew who spoke Hebrew and Aramaic, and lived in the Land of Israel in the first century. He received a Jewish education and traveled among the common people, teaching them from the Jewish Scriptures and utilizing many of the same teaching methods used by other rabbis.*

*There are many parallels between Jesus and the rabbis of his day. For instance, although Christians often associate parables exclusively with Jesus, rabbinic literature reveals that this form of expression was well established as an instructional tool among Israel's first-century rabbis. The fact that Jesus also used parables is evidence that he was a characteristic rabbi functioning in a rabbinic world.*

*In "Rabbinic Parallels," a regular feature of JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE, we will show how an examination of rabbinic literature can enhance our understanding of the sayings of Jesus.*

### The Harvest Matthew 9:37-38

הכזיר מרובה  
והפועלים עצלים מעתים.  
בקשו מבעל הקציר  
שיזוicia פועלים לকצירו.

"The (work of) harvesting is great and the workers are few. Ask the owner of the harvest to bring (more) workers for the work of harvesting."

This saying of Jesus is echoed by a passage from a well-known collection of rabbinic sayings, *Pirke Avot*, also known as the "Sayings of the Fathers." *Avot* 2:15 reads:

היום קצר והמלאתה מרובה  
והפועלים עצלים והשכיר  
הרבה ובעל הבית דוחק.

"The day is short and the work is great, but the workers are lazy; however the wages are high since the owner is in a hurry."

The fact that one can find parallels between the sayings of Jesus and the sayings of the rabbis does not necessarily mean that they borrowed directly from each other. There probably was a general pool of motifs, words and expressions from which the ancient teachers of Israel chose. Common motifs and phraseology in parallel rabbinic literary contexts (*continued on page 2*)

# A GOSPEL IN HEBREW?

From time to time, one hears reports of the discovery of a portion of the New Testament written in Hebrew or Aramaic. To date, such reports have proven false. Readers of JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE should realize that there is not a single extant Hebrew-language manuscript from the early Christian era of any New Testament book.

## FACTS

All of the canonical Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—were written in Greek. As the author of the Gospel of Luke states in his prologue, many written accounts of Jesus' life already were in circulation. The early Church fathers testify that Matthew wrote "the words of Jesus" in "Hebrew." There are many Semitisms in the Gospels.

Those are the bare facts of the matter. Any further statement regarding the original language of the life story of Jesus is conjectural. A conjecture may enhance understanding, and it may even be correct. But until it is proven, it cannot be treated as fact.

## JERUSALEM SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE

The Jerusalem School for the Study of the Synoptic Gospels has arrived at two conclusions which

### JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE

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serve as working hypotheses for their research:

- An account of Jesus' life was written in Hebrew, probably by one of Jesus' original disciples.

- One or more of the sources used by the writers of the synoptic Gospels is derived from a Greek translation of that Hebrew account.

The scholars of the Jerusalem School do not claim that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke were originally written in Hebrew. They contend only that the authors of the synoptic Gospels used sources that were derived from an earlier Hebrew gospel. In fact, not every part of the synoptic Gospels shows Semitic influence. Many parts, such as the prologue to Luke's Gospel, show little or no Semitic influence.

## SEMITIC INFLUENCE

On the other hand, there are non-Gospel portions of the New Testament which show Semitic influence. For example the first half of the book of Acts, up to 15:35, is noticeably more Semitic than the second half (cf. Max Wilcox, *The Semitisms of Acts*).

R. H. Charles, the great English scholar of the turn of the century, demonstrated that portions of the book of Revelation are translations from Hebrew sources (*International Critical Commentary*). Many members of the Jerusalem School are sympathetic to Charles' view. Contrary to what one might expect, however, the book of Hebrews is written in the purest Greek of any book in the New Testament.

While there are various degrees and types of Semitic influence throughout the New Testament, the members of the Jerusalem School recognize that all the books of the canonical New Testament, including the synoptic Gospels, were written in Greek. However, study has consistently shown the importance of recognizing the profoundly Jewish background of the Gospels.

The Jerusalem School firmly believes that a Hebraic perspective is the key to a better understanding of the Greek Testament. We invite you to join us in studying the Gospels more closely, and examining the evidence we have found to support our hypotheses.

## "THE HARVEST"

(continued from page 1)

throw light on Jesus' sayings and vice versa.

Note that while קָצֵר (ka-TSAR, short) never appears in Jesus' saying, קָצֵר (ka-TSIR, harvest) appears three times. קָצֵר has the same root as קָצֵר and, except for one vowel, the same sound.

The word קָצֵר (ka-TSIR) is not mentioned in the rabbinic saying, although it is probably implied; מְלָאָכָה (me-la-KA, work) is its replacement. The rabbinic saying speaks of בָּעֵל הַבַּיִת (BA-'al ha-BA-yit, the master of the house), while Jesus refers to בָּעֵל הַקָּצֵר (BA-'al ha-ka-TSIR, the master of the harvest). Both terms refer to God.

"Workers" are mentioned in both sayings, as is "great" or "much" which appears once in Jesus' saying and twice in the rabbinic passage. In Avot, it is the work and the pay which are "much." In Jesus' saying, it is the harvesting. In each saying, difficulty is caused by the workers: Jesus says they are too few, while in Avot they are too lazy.

There is a basic similarity between the two sayings: both teach spiritual truths by the analogy to the owner who needs laborers to complete his work quickly. Jesus' saying deals with harvesting, and although the rabbinic saying does not use the word קָצֵר (ka-TSIR), its reference to the owner's urgency may suggest a harvest scene.

Each of the above sayings is more understandable when compared with the other. The rabbinic saying in Avot contributes to Jesus' saying the added dimensions of the urgency of the task and the shortness of the time.

Jesus' efforts were directed toward bringing more and more people under God's reign—or in the rabbinic parlance he often used, getting them into the "Kingdom of Heaven." That is what he is referring to in this saying. Although he uses different words, Jesus stresses the same point as the saying in Avot: the work of the Kingdom of Heaven is all-important but difficult, and God is interested in the urgent completion of the work.

# HEBREW NUGGETS

*In our view, Hebrew is the key to understanding the Hebraic background to Jesus' words. JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE therefore features a serialized Hebrew course for beginners. Each issue will include a bite-size Hebrew lesson. This can be the beginning of your road to independent Bible study.*

We start by learning *yod* (י), the first letter in יְשֻׁעָה (ye-SHU-a), Jesus' Hebrew name. Remember that in Hebrew one reads from right to left. *Yod* is the tenth letter in the Hebrew alphabet. It is usually written with a tiny horizontal line on the top left, a decorative spur added to some Hebrew letters.

This decoration is called a *kots* (קוט), which means "thorn." In Greek it is translated "horn," and it is often rendered "tittle" in English.



Yod with  
kots

In Jesus' day, the *kots* was not horizontal but angled down and to the left like a fishhook or the barb of a thorn. That is why it was called a thorn in Hebrew. The *kots* often was as long as the *yod* itself.

*Yod* represents the "Y" sound in Hebrew. Many names in the Bible that begin with *yod* are mispronounced today by English speakers because the *yod* in these names was transliterated in English Bibles with the letter "j" rather than "y." This came about because in early English the letter "j" was pronounced the way we pronounce "y" today. All proper names in the Old Testament were transliterated into English according to their Hebrew pronunciation, but when the English pronunciation shifted to what we know today, these transliterations were not altered.

Thus such Hebrew place names as *ye-ru-sha-LA-yim*, *ye-ri-HO* and *yar-DEN* have become known to us as Jerusalem, Jericho and Jordan, and Hebrew personal names such as *yo-NA*, *yi-SHAI* and *ye-SHU-a* have become known to us as Jonah, Jesse and Jesus.

The *yod* is the smallest letter of the alphabet, which is why Jesus used it in his famous saying in Matthew 5:18: "Until heaven and earth pass away, not one *yod* —*iota* in the Greek text—or one *kots* will pass from the Torah." For emphasis, Jesus incorporated in this saying a well-known Hebrew expression:

לֹא יְוֹד וְלֹא קֹוצֵן שֶׁל יְוֹד (lo yod ve-LO ko-TSO shel yod, "not a *yod* and not a 'thorn' of a *yod*," i.e., not the most insignificant and unimportant thing).

When Jesus declared that heaven and earth might sooner disappear than the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, or even its optional decorative stroke, he was simply saying in a very picturesque way that the Law of Moses would never cease to exist. Many rabbinic sayings express the same idea: "Everything has an end—heaven and earth have an end—except one thing which has no end. And what is that? The Law" (Genesis Rabbah 10:1); "No letter will ever be abolished from the Law" (Exodus Rabbah 6:1).

*In the next issue of JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE, we will learn about the second letter in Jesus' Hebrew name. It also has an interesting story to tell.*

## SCHOLARS EARN PH.D.s

Two members of the Jerusalem School for the Study of the Synoptic Gospels earned their Ph.D. degrees this year—one in the United States and one here in Israel.

Brad Young received his doctorate at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem this past Spring. His dissertation, written under Professor David Flusser's supervision, was titled "The Parable as a Literary Genre in Rabbinic Literature and in the Gospels." It will soon be published under the title *Jesus and His Jewish Parables* by Magnes Press, Hebrew University's publishing house.

Dr. Young has now taken up his new position in the Graduate School of Theology at Oral Roberts University, where he will be Associate Professor of New



Bradford Young

Testament Studies. He will continue to be involved in the research of the Jerusalem School, and in the writing of the *Jerusalem Synoptic Commentary*.

Randall Buth received his doctorate this Spring, from U.C.L.A. The title of his 500-page thesis was

"Aramaic Word Order from the Perspectives of Functional Grammar and Discourse Analysis."

Dr. Buth earned his M.A. in 1975, at the Institute of Holy Land Studies in Jerusalem. He is a translator and consultant with Wycliffe



Randall Buth

Bible Translators in Africa.

Future issues of JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE will give more information about Dr. Young's new book, and will report on a Hebraism discovered by Dr. Buth in the Gospel of Luke which provides a significant piece of evidence that the biography of Jesus originally was written in Hebrew.

# A JEWISH BACHELOR?

The commandment "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28) has always been strongly emphasized in Judaism, both today and in the first century. It is therefore surprising that Jesus, who in every other way observed the Law of Moses, did not marry. At least the New Testament gives no indication that he had a wife or children.

The rabbis taught that one should perpetuate the human race by marrying. It was considered especially significant that the commandment "be fruitful and multiply" is chronologically the first in the Law of Moses. The School of Hillel ruled that to fulfill this commandment a man must have at least one son and one daughter:

A man may not abstain from the performance of the duty of the propagation of the race unless he already has children. (As to the number,) the School of Shammai ruled: (at least) two males, but the School of Hillel ruled: a male and a female, for it is stated in Scripture, "Male and female created he them." (Yevamot 6:6)

Would the members of first-century Jewish society have respected an unmarried 30 year-old teacher? Would his teaching have been given a hearing? We asked Shmuel Safrai for his explanation. Safrai, a professor at the Hebrew University, is a specialist in Jewish literature and history of the Second Temple period, and a member of the Jerusalem School.

According to Professor Safrai, a bachelor rabbi functioning within Jewish society of the first century was not as abnormal as it might first appear. Rabbis often spent many years far from home, first as students and then as itinerant teachers. It was not uncommon for such men to marry in their late thirties or forties. Just as some students today wait to marry until they finish their education, so there were disciples and even sages in the first century who postponed marriage until later in life.

One unmarried rabbi was Simeon ben Azzai. He lived in the generation immediately after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. It is related of him that in his teaching he so strongly emphasized the importance of the commandment to marry, his colleagues expressed their amazement that he did not do so himself. His answer:

"מָה אָעַשָּׂה? חִשְׁקָה נַפְשִׁי  
בְּתוֹרָה יְתַקִּים עָלָם בְּאֶחָדִים" ("What shall I do? I am enamored with Torah. Others can enable the world to continue to exist.") (Tosefta Yevamot 8:7).

So we see that it would have been possible for Jesus to have been accepted as a teacher in first-century Jewish society, despite the fact that he was not married.

*The publisher wishes to thank Randall Buth for his many helpful suggestions in preparing the articles which appear in this issue.*

## AN IMPORTANT NEW BOOK

Hebrew University professor David Flusser recently has completed an important collection of essays entitled *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*. This 679-page book will be released later this year by Magnes Press. Professor Flusser is co-originator, with Robert L. Lindsey, of the Jerusalem School for the Study of the Synoptic Gospels.

The book is divided into three parts: The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament, Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic, Ancient Judaism and Christianity. Two-thirds of the book consists of previously published articles that have been extensively revised. The remainder is made up of new articles, including one written with Brad Young, who served as general editor of the book. Articles include "A Rabbinic Parallel to the Sermon on the Mount," "Jesus and the Sign of the Son of Man," "A Lost Jewish Benediction in Matthew 9:8," and "Jesus' Opinion about the Essenes."

When exact details are available, JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE will inform you regarding the price and how you can order *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*.



David Flusser and Robert Lindsey, originators of the Jerusalem School